

Online Guild Spinning Challenge

Cath Snape, Online Guild and Jo Finlow, Online and Hampshire Guilds

When the Spinning Challenge was planned, we could not have foreseen where our world would be when it started in March 2020. This was an ideal lockdown activity and the offer of free membership¹ of the Online Guild meant it became even more popular.

The challenge was to create one yarn from five randomly allocated elements, the idea being that when presented with random elements you are pushed outside your comfort zone and become more creative². The bonus challenge was to make an item from the spun yarn.

To enable anyone to take part, we asked:

- At what level would you like to be challenged – gentle, moderate, or difficult?
- Do you have any restrictions on the fibre or equipment you have access to?

How it worked

Each person was dealt five ‘cards’. You could use all five cards, or discard or swap two cards.

Creating the cards meant brainstorming the elements needed to produce a yarn and putting these into sets. Colour, fibre, thickness, spinning and plying techniques came easily, but preparation, equipment and fancy yarns took longer.

The five sets were: Fibre; Design/Colour; Yarn Diameter and Spin Technique; Fibre Preparation; Plying / Spinning Equipment;

and a difficult set – Fancy Yarns. We added combinations; for example, Combine a Long and a Short Fibre, and restrictions such as Use a Piece of Equipment New to You, or Use a Fibre You Do Not Like.

Allocating difficulty to the elements was trickier. The combinations of fibres and spinning technique could easily turn easy elements into a more difficult spin; for example, longwool spun longdraw. Conversely, two or more moderately difficult elements could combine to form a relatively straightforward challenge; e.g. spin a thick art yarn finished as a single, together with using hand carded fibre.

We used an Excel spreadsheet and the wonder of random generation technology to allocate the cards, only intervening when members had restrictions on fibre or equipment available. However, as 80 people signed up and some asked for a second or third challenge, we adopted a more free style randomisation to keep up with demand.

The way people interpreted the challenge and their sets of cards was fascinating, and even experienced spinners enjoyed being pushed into new areas. We asked members for their first thoughts on their cards, and then their progress and finished yarns. The reactions to the challenge, the messages and photos posted were all amazing and inspiring, and again demonstrated the depth of creativity and imagination crafts people have.

Here a few of the participants describe examples of their creativity and the yarns they produced.



Jewel inspired yarn



Photos: Judith Edwards

Judith Edwards

My cards (difficult): short staple wool; inspired by jewels; use woollen spinning technique; chain ply; add beads. My inspiration was my sapphire and diamond engagement ring. I dyed some Hampshire Down, prepared rolags and spun them English longdraw, adding a bead every three draws or so. I threaded the beads on to the last bit of spun yarn; one advantage of the longdraw was that I could get a dozen or more beads on to the single, moving them down, before I had to thread some more. I had to stop to get the bead over the flyer hooks every time, which was a pain.

Participant	Challenge	Fibre	Design / colour	Yarn diameter and spin technique	Fibre preparation	Plying / spinning equipment	Fancy yarns
Bridget Grande	Gentle	Long staple more than 6in (15cm) wool	Inspired by sunset	Spin short backward draw	Use a commercial preparation	Use a new to you piece of equipment	
Judith Edwards	Difficult	Short staple wool	Inspired by jewels	Use woollen spinning technique		Ply 3 singles together	Add beads
Heather Adamson	Difficult	Flax	Inspired by jewels	Spin a double knitting yarn	Use hand carded fibre		Knopp / knot / stacks
Alex Glen	Medium	Mohair	Inspired by landscape	Spin a fine yarn	Spin on a stick / pencil	Ply 4 singles together	
Ann Lovick	Medium	Use short and long fibres	Spin something inspired by animals	Spin American long draw	Fractal spin split in 3	Spin on a pencil /stick	
Gaynor Lamb	Medium	An unusual fibre	Inspired by fireworks	Use a woollen spinning technique	Fractal spin split in 4	Use a 2 stage ply	
Ros Atkins	Gentle	Anything BUT wool	Inspired by dawn	Spin untwist short draw	Use hand prepared fibre	Use a new to you ply technique	



Photos: Bridget Grande



Yarn inspired by sunset, taking the 'piece of equipment, new to you' literally!



Bridget Grande, a beginner spinner 'enjoyed the great adventure'.

Wow! I have learnt such a lot!

- Use 6in staple wool – I chose Wensleydale
- Inspired by sunset – recently I have been playing around with acid dyes, so carried on my experiments and using the Wensleydale tops chose five colours (yellow through to almost red) and a very pale blue
- Spin short backward draw – mmmm, well, maybe?
- Use a commercial preparation – that will have been the acid dyes
- Equipment new to me – I made myself a Turkish spindle and I have produced my best yarns to date with it.

Gaynor Lamb

Use an Unusual Fibre; Inspired by Fireworks; Four-way Fractal Spinning; and Woollen Spin.

'I had never done fractal spinning so used YouTube to get some advice. This led me to dye the wool in sections in my microwave, another new experience. I used some old bottles of dye I had bought at the Guild, as you do!

The result was good but more inspired by bonfire so I plied in some largely yellow sari silk for the unusual fibre. I ended up with only 83g but managed to make some wonderful colourful mittens with the addition of extra wool for the cuffs. Like everyone else, I have really enjoyed finding out about new things. Really has cheered up lockdown.'



Firework yarn

Photo: Gaynor Lamb

Alex Glen

Mohair; Inspired by Landscape; Spin a Fine Yarn; Spin on a Stick/Pencil; Ply Four Singles Together

'Spinning on a stick is surprisingly relaxing if a bit slow... a good method to test spin a new fibre if out and about without much equipment.'

Having created a standard cable yarn³, she said 'The second yarn was just an experiment from reading about Hawser plying⁴ while looking for ideas. It is supposed to add some elasticity to a yarn and as mohair is a bit lacking in that department I thought I would give it a try. It was an interesting exercise but did not add any elasticity. It was not an easy spin so probably not going to repeat it anytime soon.' However, the mention of Hawser inspired others to try it.



Mohair, inspired by landscape, spin a fine yarn, spin on a stick/pencil, ply four singles together

Photos: Alex Glen



Flax, inspired by jewels, spin a double knitting yarn, use hand carded fibre, knopp / knot / stacks

Photos: Heather Adamson



Ann Lovick

I used angora bunny fibre and Shetland tops, silk carders to prepare the fibre, and turned the batt into a roving. I dyed the fibre, using some old acid Kentex dyes, my slow cooker and rainbow dyeing. I had yellow, green and blue dyes available.

The lessons I learned – dyeing the fibre as a roving meant that the fibres matted making it hard to spin, especially with American longdraw, and the yellow dye mostly got subsumed into green.

Second attempt. I dyed the fibre in separate batches of colour before preparing for spinning – then made rolags to get a bit more air in my American longdraw spinning. The spinning of the fractal sequence worked. I then Navajo plied it onto my largest spindle.

It was great fun. Although I used the same dyes as in my first attempt, the colours came out quite different.

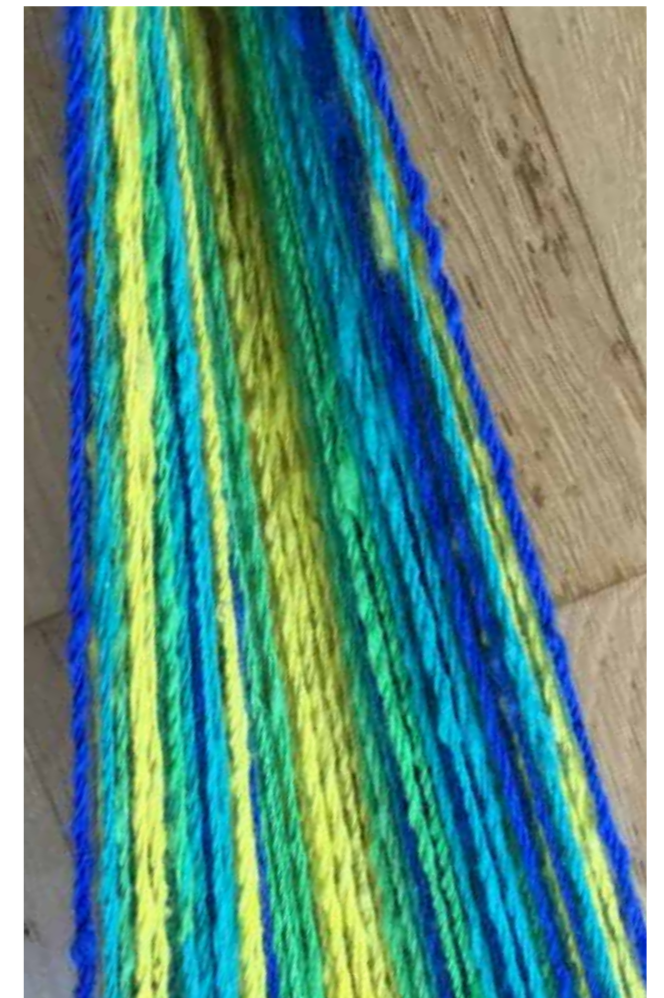
Photos: Ann Lovick



Heather Adamson

Heather initially reported too many challenges to take part! But then she said:

'My resistance has been broken... thought I should see if I could do this and had to burst into laughter when I did a little sample of what I consider most useless yarn, though it is a very strong, perhaps even attractive bit of rope. I have even managed knots. Too bad I did not get all of my cards done right but it was fun doing what I usually try not to do when spinning yarn.'



Fractal spun, chain plied, combined short and long fibres



Anything but wool, inspired by dawn, spin untwist short draw, hand prepared fibre, new plying technique

Ros Atkins

'First thoughts:

- Anything but wool. Hmm... I've just acquired some bamboo fibre and I have some silk so I'm good for number 1.
- Inspired by dawn, yes, I can probably work with that!
- Spin untwist short draw – quick panic, not heard of that but video a great help and I reckon I sort of do this already at times!
- Hand prepared fibre, no problem.
- New plying technique... I shall think on this as I start.'

A message, a few days later:

'After a lot of thought and displacement activity, I have made a start! I have been making my bamboo/silk fauxlags on my blending board... never thought I'd say I was so pleased to be carding silk, it helps control the really fly-away bamboo!

I decided to try the new spinning technique on a sample of prepared bamboo fibre tops. My, what fine, slippery, silky stuff it is! The untwist short draw technique helped with the control. However, I found that to hold the yarn together I needed quite a bit of twist and my balancing act is going to be getting that just right so that I can avoid a hard yarn.

This is the result; a soft and squishy 3 ply yarn of blended bamboo and silk inspired by dawn, albeit a cold, watery looking one! Thoroughly enjoyed the challenge, I'd never have produced anything like this without the push and I'm going to spin up some more so that I can make myself some sort of summer tunic, I think.'

Photos: Ros Atkins



Light summer tunic, based on a Norah Gaughan pattern where you knit a continuous strip and join it to make the body



Core spun scraps
Jane Stevens



Inspired by Seasons
Sue Collins



All photos on this page courtesy of the artists



Inspired by 'Spring Greens'
Ros Atkins

Footnotes

- 1 Free membership to the Online Guild was offered in March 2020; this offer closed 31 October 2020.
- 2 The idea for this challenge followed the Weaving Design Challenge (Online Guild workshop 2018) which was based on a game in a book by Ann Sutton and Diane Sheehan, *Ideas in Weaving* (1989). Because of the success of both, there is a dyeing challenge being developed, hopefully to run in 2022. If you would like more information about this challenge – join the Online Guild or contact the authors direct.
- 3 Cable Yarn: Spin four singles Z; Ply in two pairs S; Ply the pairs together Z.
- 4 Hawser ply: Spin four singles Z; Ply in two pairs, Z; Ply the two pairs together S.

About the authors: Cath Snape and Jo Finlow are experienced spinners, members of the Online Guild and part of the Workshop Programme Sub Group (WPSG) who plan and organise the workshops for the Guild. Team members usually just support tutors running the workshops but, in this case, they also ran the workshop!

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